United Nations E/AC.51/2013/5

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
25 March 2013

Original: English

Committee for Programme and Coordination
Fifty-third session
Substantive session, 3-28 June 2013
Item 3 (b) of the provisional agenda*
Programme questions: evaluation

Review of the evaluation capacity of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) identified the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for evaluation based on a risk assessment carried out in 2008. The Committee for Programme and Coordination selected the programme evaluation of UNHCR for consideration at its fifty-third session in June 2013 (see A/66/16, para. 66). The General Assembly endorsed the selection in its resolution 66/8 (see para. 6).

Following consultations and discussions with UNHCR senior management and building from recent findings emanating from the Board of Auditors and external reviews, it was agreed that it would be more timely and useful to conduct a review of the evaluation capacity of UNHCR before undertaking an evaluation of the programme.

The purpose of the OIOS review was to assess the current evaluation capacity in UNHCR and determine how it could be improved to better contribute to organizational results, learning and accountability. It used quantitative and qualitative methods, including a document review, interviews, surveys, a field mission and a meta-evaluation of UNHCR evaluation reports.

* E/AC.51/2013/1.

13-26973 (E) 100413

Please recycle

The evaluation function in UNHCR has not been clearly defined. While the current evaluation policy uses the basic definition of evaluation as endorsed by the United Nations Evaluation Group, it does not adequately articulate a clear and distinct role for the function nor link evaluation explicitly to the mandates, goals and strategic priorities of UNHCR. An assessment of the 28 reports from 2010 and 2011 labelled as UNHCR evaluation reports on the Policy Development and Evaluation Service website were in fact a mixture of evaluations, policy papers, think pieces and academic research papers. In addition, dedicated resources for the evaluation function, as part of the overall UNHCR budget, have been low.

Nevertheless, the work of the Policy Development and Evaluation Service, which is currently tasked with undertaking evaluation in UNHCR, has served a useful purpose, given its mandate and resources. It has maintained a high level of productivity with just five staff and a limited consultancy budget for conducting evaluations. In general, feedback from UNHCR stakeholders with regard to the information the Service provides on policy matters has been positive.

The current evaluation function also does not fully meet the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group for evaluation independence, credibility and utility. The function has limited independence given its placement within a section that simultaneously undertakes policy development and research, and evaluation has dual reporting lines to the High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner, although both are in the Executive Office. The work-planning process is largely demand-driven and is not based on an assessment of organizational risks, and the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme does not review or discuss individual evaluation reports, although many members surveyed suggested they would like to do so.

Furthermore, the credibility of the evaluation function of UNHCR is constrained by methodological limitations in assessing organizational results. Stakeholders reported insufficient evaluation of UNHCR performance and impact in respect of all aspects of its mandate, including both its protection and programme work, with little evaluative evidence available for strategic decision-making. Also, with the exception of the Head of the Policy Development and Evaluation Service, staff responsible for evaluation are not required to have evaluation experience or technical competencies. Regular and systematic follow-up processes for discussing evaluation results and tracking evaluation recommendations have been lacking, which has further limited the utility of evaluation in UNHCR.

Unlike other United Nations entities with a strong field presence, UNHCR does not have a functional centralized and decentralized evaluation structure, and there is limited evaluative evidence on UNHCR country programme performance. In other United Nations entities with a strong field presence, centralized evaluation addresses organization-wide strategic issues and is usually carried out independently from those responsible for programme operations and the results evaluated. Decentralized evaluation, on the other hand, has a more narrow scope and is typically embedded within programme operations. While it is already doing this to some extent, UNHCR can utilize existing resources and activities within the Division of Programme Support and Management and the Division of International Protection more strategically in order to systematize and regularize its decentralized evaluation.

OIOS made the following five important recommendations, with which UNHCR agreed or partially agreed:

- Establish a dedicated and discrete evaluation unit at headquarters with responsibility for conducting programmatic and cross-cutting strategic evaluations of UNHCR
- Revise the UNHCR evaluation policy
- Strengthen the rigour and utility of UNHCR programme evaluations
- Develop a regular and systematic process for follow-up to evaluation recommendations
- Develop a strategy for strengthening decentralized evaluation in the field

Contents

		Page
I.	Introduction	4
II.	Scope and methodology	4
III.	Background	5
IV.	Evaluation in the United Nations system	6
V.	Review results	7
	A. Lack of clear definition of the evaluation function in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	7
	B. Current evaluation capacity of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: key United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards for independence, credibility and utility not fully met	9
	C. Lack of a functional centralized and decentralized evaluation system common to other United Nations entities with a strong field presence	14
VI.	Conclusion	17
VII.	Recommendations	18
Annex		
	Memorandum dated 20 March 2013 from the Deputy High Commissioner of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees addressed to the Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services	21

I. Introduction

1. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) identified the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for evaluation based on a risk assessment carried out in 2008. The Committee for Programme and Coordination selected the programme evaluation of UNHCR for consideration at its fifty-third session in June 2013 (see A/66/16, para. 61). The General Assembly endorsed the selection in its resolution 66/8 (see para. 6).

2. Following consultations and discussions with UNHCR senior management and building from recent findings emanating from the Board of Auditors and external reviews, it was agreed that it would be more timely and useful at this juncture to conduct a review of the evaluation capacity of UNHCR before undertaking an evaluation of the programme.

3. The purpose of this review was to:

(a) Assess the current evaluation capacity in UNHCR; and

(b) Determine how it could be improved to better contribute to organizational results, learning and accountability.

II. Scope and methodology

4. OIOS undertook the review from June to December 2012. It was not a comprehensive programme evaluation, and the review followed terms of reference agreed to by both OIOS and UNHCR. While appreciating that evaluation and policy development in UNHCR are integrated, as per the decision of successive High Commissioners since 1999, OIOS limited its review to the UNHCR evaluation function only. In the present report, OIOS refers to "programme evaluation" as encompassing the full range of the UNHCR mandate, including protection, solutions and assistance activities within a given country operation. This would include evaluation at the country, regional and global levels.

5. In assessing evaluation capacity at UNHCR, OIOS utilized methodology endorsed by the United Nations Evaluation Group, of which UNHCR is a member. This methodology was developed for the Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of the Evaluation Function in United Nations Organizations and is derived from three criteria based on the Group's norms and standards for evaluation:[1]

(a) Independence, which determines the impartiality of evaluations;

(b) Credibility, which explores the relevance and effectiveness of evaluations by focusing on the quality, methodological rigour, transparency and consultative nature; and

(c) Utility, which covers the relevance, use and cost of evaluation products.

[1] See United Nations Evaluation Group Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of the Evaluation Function of UN Organizations, UNEG/REF(2011)1.

6. The review used the following quantitative and qualitative data-collection methods:

(a) A critical review of relevant documentation, including United Nations internal and public documents and external literature on UNHCR and its evaluation function;

(b) An electronic, self-administered survey of a non-random sample of 12 country offices. The survey was conducted in November 2012, and nine offices responded (a 75 per cent response rate);[2]

(c) An electronic, self-administered survey of all 87 members of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. The survey was conducted in October and November 2012, and 29 members responded (a 33 per cent response rate);[3]

(d) Eighty-seven semi-structured interviews conducted in person, in groups or over the telephone with UNHCR staff and stakeholders;

(e) Field missions to the Nairobi and Kakuma, Kenya, offices to understand the monitoring and evaluation function in the field;

(f) A comparison of evaluation functions at similar United Nations organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP); and

(g) A meta-evaluation of 28 UNHCR reports from 2010 and 2011, produced by the UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service and identified as evaluation reports on its website.[4]

All analyses were triangulated with data from multiple sources to strengthen the review results.

7. OIOS consulted with UNHCR at key points during the review, and thanks UNHCR for its cooperation and assistance. Annex 1 to the present report includes the response of UNHCR.

III. Background

8. The UNHCR headquarters evaluation function was first established in 1973 with a single evaluation post reporting directly to the High Commissioner. Since then, the function has had a number of configurations: from 1994 to 1999 it was called the Inspection and Evaluation Unit, and from 1999 to 2006 it was known as the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit. It is currently known as the Policy Development

[2] The 12 offices were selected based on the following criteria: size and type of refugee population, years in operation, mandate and geographic region. Not all nine respondents answered every survey question, and thus the survey data reported are presented from the denominator of the number of respondents who answered the question being reported.

[3] The low response rate limits the ability to generalize conclusions from the survey results. Survey results are calculated without the "no opinion" responses.

[4] OIOS used an independent consultant to conduct the meta-evaluation, which focused on four criteria: quality, credibility, independence and utility, drawn from the United Nations Evaluation Group "Norms for Evaluation in the UN System", "Quality Checklist for Evaluation Reports", and "Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of the Evaluation Function of UN organizations".

and Evaluation Service. The Service discharges a number of responsibilities in addition to evaluation and integrates the functions of policy development, research and knowledge management by providing a focus for external research and publications. The Service is located in the Executive Office and the Head has a bifurcated reporting line, reporting to the High Commissioner on policy matters and to the Deputy High Commissioner on evaluation matters.

9. The Service's terms of reference also require it to collaborate closely with the Deputy High Commissioner and both Assistant High Commissioners on issues such as real-time evaluations, namely, requests from senior managers at headquarters and country offices seeking quick "snapshot" reviews of issues of corporate relevance, along with advice on policy and evaluation issues. The Service's workplan is produced on a rolling basis, updated every six months and reviewed by the Executive Office. This is indicative of the multidimensional responsibilities and dynamic, demand-driven nature of the Service's functions.

10. The Policy Development and Evaluation Service also oversees "New Issues in Refugee Research", a web-based series of research papers focusing on refugee, humanitarian and migration issues, for which it accepts submissions from academic and policy experts, staff members and associates.

11. In addition to evaluation conducted by the Service, some of the larger UNHCR country offices have commissioned their own programme evaluations on an ad hoc basis. However, there is no systematic and regular decentralized evaluation at the regional or country level.

12. Furthermore, the Inspector General's Office also conducts regular inspections of UNHCR operations and offices around the world to ensure that they are being run in conformity with organizational rules and regulations. From 2009 to 2012, the Office conducted 28 standard inspections and three compliance missions. Follow-up to inspection missions are monitored through regular compliance reporting exercises. The Office has issued 27 inspection closure memorandums since July 2011 covering the period from 2008 to 2012.

IV. Evaluation in the United Nations system

13. In assessing the current UNHCR evaluation capacity, it is useful to first provide the context of what a robust and meaningful evaluation function would look like. Programme evaluation in the United Nations system serves two fundamental purposes: (a) to provide for programme accountability to donors, senior leadership and beneficiaries; and (b) to determine programme effectiveness as well as lessons learned for programme improvement.

14. A comprehensive approach to evaluation for an entity such as UNHCR answers three critical questions:

(a) *Are we doing the right things*? This question addresses the relevance, nature and scope of programme interventions and operations. Specifically, the question addresses whether the programme is appropriately designed to adequately address the nature of the issues and problems it is trying to address;

(b) *Are we doing them right*? This question addresses the quality and efficiency of programme interventions and operations. Specifically, the question

addresses what is being implemented well and what is not, and how implementation could be improved;

(c) *Are we doing these things on a sufficient scale to be making a difference*? This question addresses programme coverage, effectiveness and impact, including programme cost-effectiveness and value added. It is the most difficult evaluation question to answer and requires a rigorous mixed-methods approach that triangulates the analysis of multiple data sources in a structured manner. It determines the degree to which a programme is achieving its intended objectives and contributing to larger impacts.

15. An entity must establish a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework as a first step to enable routine and periodic assessment of these fundamental questions. Reliable and credible information must be obtained on the entity's performance to facilitate strategic decision-making and budget and resource allocations.

16. Once interventions and programme operations are well-defined, implemented and under way for some time, there is also a need for periodic and ongoing assessments of quality and sustainability to determine how they can be improved. A comprehensive evaluation portfolio would include evaluations focused at the country, regional and global levels. The evaluations would provide complementary information on how the programme is performing overall and would utilize indicators that track agency outputs, outcomes and impacts.

V. Review results

A. Lack of clear definition of the evaluation function in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(a) The current UNHCR evaluation policy does not sufficiently link evaluation to organizational mandates and goals

17. The UNHCR evaluation policy, which was revised in August 2010, defines the overarching framework guiding UNHCR evaluations and is critical for establishing a clear and strong identity for the function. The current UNHCR evaluation policy describes evaluation as "the analysis and assessment, as systematic and objective as possible, of the organization's policies, programmes, practices, partnerships and procedures, focusing on their planning, design, implementation and impact". However, it does not articulate a clear and distinct role for evaluation in UNHCR, particularly in relation to other organizational functions such as inspection and performance review. The policy does not describe how evaluation will be conducted within the specific UNHCR context nor does it sufficiently link evaluation to the specific mandates, goals and strategic priorities of the organization, as called for in the United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards for evaluation policies.[5] For example, the UNDP policy defines the purpose of evaluation as assessing UNDP impact on poverty eradication, economic growth and sustainable development of programme countries; the UNHCR policy has no such link to the specific and unique mandate of UNHCR. Finally, the policy lacks a clear description of the roles

[5] See Standards for Evaluation in the UN System, Standard 1.2.

and responsibilities in respect of evaluation in UNHCR. While the Policy Development and Evaluation Service is referred to as a "focal point for evaluation", the policy contains little detail on its specific tasks and responsibilities, or the roles and contributions expected from regional bureaux and country offices.

(b) Documents labelled as evaluation reports include a variety of different publications

18. The 28 reports identified on the Policy Development and Evaluation Service website as evaluation reports from 2010 and 2011 represented a variety of subjects and genres. Some were clearly evaluations of UNHCR interventions. Others, however, were policy papers, think pieces or academic research papers not directly related to the evaluation of UNHCR interventions. There was no discernible basis for categorizing all these papers as evaluation reports, as categorized on the website.

(c) Evaluation resources are low

19. Resources currently devoted to evaluation in UNHCR are low. For the 2012-2013 biennium, resources identified for the Policy Development and Evaluation Service were estimated at $3.6 million, having risen from $3 million in 2010-2011 and $2.1 million in 2008-2009. This compares unfavourably with evaluation resources in similar United Nations entities. For example, WFP had an evaluation consultancy budget of approximately $5 million for 2012, while the consultancy budget of UNHCR was only $375,000 for the same time period. Overall, the resources dedicated to staffing the evaluation function are very small in relation to the size and breadth of the work of UNHCR. Evaluation resources constitute .05 to .08 per cent of the overall UNHCR budget, which is below the standard benchmark established for evaluation of 3 to 5 per cent of the overall budget of a programme.

(d) The Policy Development and Evaluation Service has served a useful function

20. Given its current mandate and resources, the Policy Development and Evaluation Service has nevertheless served a useful purpose in the organization. With a small cadre of five staff (1 D-1, 1 P-5, 2 P-4 and 1 GS) to support the three integrated functions of evaluation, policy development and research, the Service produced 61 evaluations/reviews, 5 policy reports and 106 publications of "New Issues" web publications between 2006 to 2011.[6] Feedback from UNHCR stakeholders on its work has generally been favourable. A majority of respondents to the Executive Committee survey (80 per cent) were very or somewhat satisfied with the information received from the Service. Also, senior headquarters managers who were interviewed noted that the Service provides useful information on key policy issues. A majority of the country office survey respondents (six out of seven who responded to the question) reported that they have used Service reports, specifically mentioning that the analyses of the issues they were facing in their own programme operations and the reporting of good practices from within the organization were particularly useful.

21. In particular, the Service has a high-profile identity in respect of policy issues within UNHCR. It is often called upon to provide input for speeches by the High Commissioner and, in recent years, has also taken on the role of an internal think tank responding to the High Commissioner's requests for targeted information. The

[6] *Source*: OIOS compilation of reports on the UNHCR website.

Service also oversees "New Issues in Refugee Research", a web-based series of research papers focusing on refugee, humanitarian and migration issues, for which it accepts submissions from academic and policy experts, and contributes to the flagship publication *The State of the World's Refugees*. Furthermore, the Service has been recognized as a pioneer in terms of supporting the development of real-time evaluation, which has become common in humanitarian practice within and outside the United Nations system. In terms of strategic, corporate-level policy advice, the Service is credited with helping to promote UNHCR thinking on such issues as urban refugees and the age, gender and diversity approach to programme formulation and implementation.

B. Current evaluation capacity of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: key United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards for independence, credibility and utility not fully met

22. Despite not being clearly defined, OIOS assessed the evaluation capacity that does currently exist in UNHCR. This capacity has been constrained by limitations in three critical criteria derived from United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards: independence, credibility and utility. Each of these three criteria will be discussed in detail below.

(a) Independence: the evaluation function of UNHCR has limited independence

23. The independence criterion is derived from United Nations Evaluation Group Norm 6, which establishes that the evaluation process should be impartial and independent in its function from the process concerned with policymaking, programme delivery and management at an organization.[7] It also requires systemic measures for ensuring the necessary objectivity and impartiality of evaluation.

24. This criterion is significant, since it ensures that the evaluation function, both in theory and in practice, operates in an independent manner, and allows those undertaking evaluations to have no bias or appearance of bias. The function should be placed organizationally so that it is independent from other management and programme functions under its purview. Typically, it is placed in the executive office of senior management or located independently as a separate unit.

25. Additionally, the head of an independent evaluation function should report directly to the governing body or the head of the organization (see United Nations Evaluation Group Standard 1.1). In practice, this means reporting to senior management staff who are not involved in programmes that are the subject of evaluation. Usually, this is the most senior manager at the organization. In the same manner, the evaluation function should also have full discretion in directly submitting its reports for consideration at the appropriate level of decision-making pertaining to the subject of evaluation. In addition, a system must be in place for systematic consideration of the findings, conclusions and recommendations contained in evaluations, which also allows the information to be utilized for organizational decision-making (see United Nations Evaluation Group Norm 2.6).

[7] See the United Nations Evaluation Group's Norms for Evaluation in the UN System.

26. Within UNHCR, evaluation is integrated with and embedded within a larger section (Policy Development and Evaluation Service) that undertakes evaluation, policy development and research; the UNHCR evaluation policy states that the Service also assists the Executive Office to identify the need for new or revised policy statements and, in close consultation with other divisions, departments and regional bureaux, contributes to their formulation, dissemination and promotion.[8] Service staff members undertake all three activities, with none dedicated exclusively to evaluation. The policy responsibilities of the Service are broad, covering the formulation of global operational policies (other than those for finance, administration, procurement or human resources management), forward-looking policy analysis and development capacity, and identification of the need for new or revised policy statements in consultation with divisions.[8] While UNHCR has intentionally sought to link policy and evaluation through the co-location of these functions within the Service to ensure that evaluation findings are fed directly into the policymaking process, there is risk of real or perceived conflict of interest since the Service plays a dual role in both developing policy and in evaluating the implementation of that policy. In UNHCR, further risk of conflict of interest exists with regard to joint evaluations undertaken with other entities; in such evaluations, the Service participates as both evaluation partner and the entity within UNHCR responsible for coordinating a management response on behalf of the organization.

27. Furthermore, while the location of the Policy Development and Evaluation Service within the High Commissioner's office is appropriate in terms of promoting structural independence, the Head of the Service reports to the High Commissioner on policy matters and to the Deputy High Commissioner on evaluation matters.[9] This reporting line places evaluation within direct resource management reporting lines (although the Deputy High Commissioner does have responsibility for oversight), thus potentially compromising independence. It is also not aligned with good practice at other United Nation entities. For example, at WFP and UNDP, the Evaluation Director reports to the Executive Director and to the Executive Board and does not have a dual reporting line to other senior managers.

28. The current work-planning process for evaluation in UNHCR also poses a risk to the independence of the function, since it is largely demand-driven, although the Policy Development and Evaluation Service has full methodological independence in designing its evaluations. There is no strategic risk-based work-planning system in place that lays the foundation, in consultation with critical stakeholders, for an independent assessment of the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of UNHCR and the topics presenting the greatest risk to the organization and therefore meriting evaluation.

29. While the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme is not the governing body of UNHCR, it undertakes an important advisory role and approves the organization's budget. The Policy Development and Evaluation Service has adopted the good practice of providing an annual report to the Executive Committee on the activities for the year (see, for example, A/AC.96/1115). However, evaluation reports themselves are not directly tabled for discussion or review; the Executive Committee is only advisory and must still go through the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Fifth

[8] See UNHCR Evaluation Policy, August 2010, page 9.

[9] See UNHCR organigram and evaluation policy.

Committee of the General Assembly. UNHCR must strike the same right balance between reporting to its Executive Committee and these other bodies.

30. Feedback from the Executive Committee members further suggests the need to strengthen the independence of the evaluation function. A majority of Executive Committee survey respondents (64 per cent) reported that the Committee should be responsible for ensuring that evaluations are conducted in an independent and impartial manner, and the same percentage agreed that the Committee should be responsible for ensuring that evaluation contributes to decision-making and management. Executive Committee survey respondents also indicated that there should be more time for discussion on evaluation and requested that the Policy Development and Evaluation Service keep them better informed on the UNHCR evaluation process overall. Finally, Executive Committee survey respondents suggested that the Policy Development and Evaluation Service annual report should include more information from evaluations, such as findings on effectiveness, efficiency and impact, and how evaluations are being integrated into and improving the UNHCR work programme.

(b) Credibility: The credibility of the evaluation function in UNHCR is constrained by methodological limitations in assessing results

31. The credibility criterion is derived from United Nations Evaluation Group Norms 5, 8, 9 and 11, which address the impartiality, quality, competency and ethics of evaluation. Credibility is dependent on the expertise and independence of the evaluators and the degree of transparency of the evaluation process. Credible evaluations are impartial and methodologically rigorous and present both programme achievements and programme challenges. Views of all stakeholders are taken into account and in the event that interested parties have different views, these should be reflected in the evaluation analysis and reporting (see United Nations Evaluation Group Norm 5). Credible evaluations are also designed and planned with appropriate methods.

32. While the staff of the Policy Development and Evaluation Service bring a wide range of relevant operational experience, their evaluation competencies are more limited. Within the United Nations, evaluation functions address credibility by ensuring that staff have evaluation experience and skills to both conduct evaluations and manage externally hired evaluators (consultants). Agencies with rotational policies often ensure a core qualified staff, with some, such as WFP, having a 50/50 mix of evaluation and programme staff. This ensures that evaluations are credible from both an evaluation and programme perspective. Common guidelines and consistent evaluative approaches also strengthen credibility.

33. Although the job description for the Head of the Policy Development and Evaluation Service requires experience in evaluation, such experience is not required for the other professional staff. The latter are internal staff members on four- to five-year rotational posts who typically do not have evaluation training, experience or competencies relating to evaluation. Owing to UNHCR human resources rules requiring staff rotation, the Service does not have a secure cadre of staff at headquarters for the function. The current head of the Service has therefore had to train the professional staff on basic evaluation methods and approaches.

34. Survey and interview data provide further evidence of the problem posed by the lack of qualified evaluation staff in UNHCR. Four out of seven country offices

responding to the country office survey volunteered that more evaluation training and expertise is needed at the country level to strengthen the evaluation function. Also, key headquarters staff who were interviewed confirmed that there was room to strengthen evaluation methodology in order to more effectively assess the impact of UNHCR work on the ground.

35. To supplement staff resources, the Policy Development and Evaluation Service has also used consultants who are experienced evaluators to assist with its workplan, although resources for this have been low. The Service's consultancy budget has remained constant in recent years, at approximately $350,000 to $375,000, and has not grown relative to the overall budget of UNHCR. Thus, the use of expert consultants with evaluation skills does not fully address the gap created by evaluation staff with limited evaluation backgrounds.

36. OIOS undertook a meta-evaluation of the 28 reports issued by the Policy Development and Evaluation Service in 2010 and 2011 to determine whether the reports met basic United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards and to assess overall strengths and weaknesses.[10] The overall strengths of the Service reports included the presentation and overall rationale for undertaking the evaluation/research, identification of the subject of the report, inclusion of alternate perspectives, and manageable nature of the recommendations. The reports were generally well-written and logically structured. For example, the Service has published two series of evaluations on protracted refugee situations and on the phenomenon of mixed migration. These reports were mostly standardized, so that the reader became familiar with the structure and knew what to expect across the set of papers. Reports also clearly identified why the evaluation/research was being conducted and why it was important to UNHCR strategic interests, often citing a need identified by the High Commissioner.

37. However, the reports reviewed scored lower on quality, with a high degree of variance among all the reports assessed, primarily owing to methodological limitations in assessing programme results and impact, which admittedly are challenging to assess given the UNHCR mandate. The reports often did not have clear findings in respect of the results of UNHCR interventions but instead highlighted general challenges, constraints or issues. Even in reports that were clearly evaluations, it was often not obvious what the results of the organization's work were. The reports lacked information on the evaluation criteria, data-collection methods and analytical framework. This was particularly the case with evaluations conducted with Policy Development and Evaluation Service staff and mixed teams. The evaluation reports undertaken by external consultants managed by Service staff, who also finalized the evaluations, were found to be of higher quality than those produced by Service staff and mixed teams.

38. Similar to the findings of the meta-evaluation, UNHCR stakeholders have reported insufficient evaluation of UNHCR performance and results in respect of all aspects of its mandate, including both its protection and programme work. A majority of Executive Committee survey respondents (55 per cent) reported that the Policy Development and Evaluation Service has been somewhat or very ineffective in providing evidence-based information for decision-making, and some suggest the

[10] Meta-evaluation is the "systematic review of evaluations to determine the quality of their processes and findings" (Cooksy and Caracelli, "Quality, Context and Use: Issues in Achieving the Goals of Meta-evaluation" (2005)).

need for evaluation results to feed into UNHCR work programmes. Some of these respondents also volunteered that UNHCR evaluations should elaborate more clearly on the basis for their findings and conclusions. Furthermore, senior managers at headquarters identified a gap in robust evaluation for determining the results and impact of UNHCR on the ground, and a lack of evaluative evidence on how cost-efficient and effective UNHCR has been. Two out of seven country office survey respondents stated that UNHCR evaluation reports provided senior managers with assessments of results achieved only to a small extent or not at all, and four said only to some extent. Also, a majority (four out of seven) stated that evaluation reports provided stakeholders with an opportunity to present their assessments of UNHCR mandated activities only to a small extent.

(c) Utility: limited use of evaluation and recommendation follow-up poses significant risks for learning and accountability

39. The utility criterion is derived from United Nations Evaluation Group Norms 1, 2, 8, 10 and 12, which address the definition, responsibility, quality, transparency, consultation and follow-up of evaluations. Utility is dependent on clear and concise evaluation findings that are perceived as relevant and useful and have an impact on decision-making, including through systematic follow-up. To ensure maximum utility of evaluation reports, clear procedures for recommendation follow-up and implementation, with established timelines for checking on the status of implementation and progress, should be established. Within the United Nations, it is common practice for evaluation functions, including those in UNDP and WFP, to have established clear procedures for response to evaluation reports by management and a forum for discussion of the reports, such as in the governing body.

40. Currently, there is no regular and systematic follow-up process in UNHCR for discussing evaluation results and tracking evaluation recommendations.[11] This undermines the utility of evaluation reports both at headquarters and in the field and poses significant risk for learning and accountability. Evaluation reports lack systematic follow-up by UNHCR management, staff or the Executive Committee, and there is no formal management response to the reports. There is also no formal mechanism for considering evaluation findings and conclusions. Additionally, while the reports are on the UNHCR website, there are no formal mechanisms for extracting lessons learned from the evaluations and integrating them back into organizational work processes and programmes. Almost half of Executive Committee survey respondents (46 per cent) stated that the Committee should ensure systematic consideration of evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations.

41. UNHCR also lacks a systematic method for tracking the implementation of recommendations. There is no formal mechanism that assesses whether recommendations are being enacted, nor is any individual or entity held accountable for enacting them. Headquarters and field staff who were interviewed widely acknowledged this deficiency as needing improvement. Furthermore, a majority of Executive Committee survey respondents with an opinion on the issue (56 per cent) reported that UNHCR was somewhat or very ineffective in providing follow-up on how findings, conclusions and recommendations have been integrated into

[11] UNHCR reports that since the OIOS review, it has introduced a management response requirement. However, such a requirement was not in place at the time of the review.

UNHCR's work. A majority (56 per cent) also stated that they were somewhat or very dissatisfied with follow-up by the Policy Development and Evaluation Service on recommendations. In fact, evaluation follow-up procedures were the one component of the current evaluation function that received — across the board — the lowest rating from Executive Committee members. Without adequate evaluation follow-up, it will remain difficult to assess the organization's impact and value-for-money.

42. The UNHCR Internal Compliance and Accountability Committee established in June 2012 has the potential to address this weakness in follow-up. The Committee was established to strengthen organizational and personal accountability and is intended to be the central internal body for prioritizing and monitoring the implementation of recommendations received from audits, evaluations, inspections and ad hoc reports. The headquarters and field staff interviewed also identified the Internal Compliance and Accountability Committee as a potential body for fostering knowledge management by applying evaluation lessons learned into policy and programming. Given how recently the Committee was established, it remains to be seen whether it will be able to adequately address some of the gaps in evaluation follow-up identified in the present review.

C. Lack of a functional centralized and decentralized evaluation system common to other United Nations entities with a strong field presence

43. Given that most UNHCR operations are in the field away from its headquarters, an evaluation function that comprises both centralized and decentralized evaluation would facilitate an assessment of its work at all levels: field, region and headquarters. Centralized evaluation has a broader scope, assessing work at the global, organization-wide level. It is carried out independently from those responsible for protection and programme operations, and the entity undertaking the evaluation is not responsible for producing the results it seeks to evaluate. Centralized evaluation addresses organization-wide, cross-cutting strategic issues of relevance to the entire organization. It also independently assesses the quality of decentralized evaluations and establishes the criteria against which decentralized evaluation activities will be assessed in the organization. Generally, this function is undertaken at a headquarters location.

44. Decentralized evaluation, on the other hand, has a comparatively narrower scope. It is carried out at the field level, including in both country and regional offices, and includes a headquarters component to support and coordinate decentralized activities and to consolidate and report on results where appropriate. It is embedded within programme operations, the results of which it seeks to evaluate, and addresses issues of specific relevance and priority in country and regional programming. Decentralization ensures that the evidence generated is relevant to the local context, which helps to inform national policies. Generally, this function is undertaken at the operational level by regional and/or field offices with a close tie to the headquarters division appropriate to the evaluation subject at headquarters.

45. In order for the decentralized evaluation function to be credible, and to follow good practice from other operational entities within the United Nations, several criteria must be met. First, there is a need for quality assurance, which is typically

the responsibility of the centralized evaluation function, as is the case in UNDP and the United Nations Population Fund, which produces an annual report on its quality assessments of country evaluations. Also, common organizational standards and procedures, as well as training for field staff on the basic conduct of evaluation, are required to facilitate consistency and reliability among different country and regional offices. A work-planning process is also needed to ensure a regular and coordinated programme of decentralized evaluation; this typically would be undertaken by the headquarters office with responsibility for field operations.

46. Two challenges faced by other United Nations entities with centralized and decentralized evaluation functions are: (a) the need to clearly delineate the scope, including respective roles and responsibilities, of centralized and decentralized evaluation activities; and (b) the need to establish an integrated and comprehensive evaluation function that avoids a disjointed approach to evaluation in the organization. These have been addressed through the establishment of clear and precise evaluation policies, coordination mechanisms, and regular and open communication.

47. The lack of a regular and systematic decentralized evaluation function in UNHCR has resulted in limited evaluative evidence on UNHCR country programme performance, including its protection, solutions and assistance activities. As illustrated by the field mission to UNHCR offices in Kenya, there are currently no regular and systematic assessments of the results achieved by individual country offices that could provide useful information for decision-making regarding future country programming, specifically on overall focus, strategic priorities, critical activities and impact on beneficiaries.

48. The UNHCR decentralized evaluations that do take place are generally ad hoc and undertaken at the discretion of country office managers; they also vary with regard to scope, timing and type. Four out of nine country office survey respondents reported having carried out an evaluation in the past two years. Most notably, real-time evaluations are conducted by the Policy Development and Evaluation Service on a needs-driven basis, under the guidance of the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, to respond to emergencies. Attention is currently being paid to the need to regularize the protocols for these exercises. In some cases, these evaluations are taken on as inter-agency exercises to provide a managerial snapshot to gauge progress and highlight constraints requiring instant operational attention.

49. The programme performance reporting that currently takes place at the country level has the potential to feed into and support more systematic decentralized evaluation. Much of this activity is part of the annual programming cycle and its monitoring and reporting requirements. Programme performance reporting provides useful information on programming activity and progress towards results. For example, the Kakuma, Kenya, field office undertakes an annual operations review that is a participatory process for reviewing UNHCR results with its implementing partners and beneficiaries.

50. Furthermore, existing capacity within the Division of Programme Support and Management and the Division of International Protection could be better utilized to strengthen decentralized evaluation. There is opportunity to strategically build upon existing activities and resources to develop a more systematic structure for decentralized evaluation by strengthening the existing components for evaluation within these two Divisions.

51. There are models within the United Nations that UNHCR could consider in developing a centralized and decentralized evaluation system. For example, WFP has both a centralized and decentralized evaluation function;[12] the former is based in headquarters and undertakes strategic evaluations with a global perspective, while the latter, following the same standards as centralized evaluations, is the responsibility of regional bureaux and country offices and focuses on country operations.[13] WFP undertakes a portfolio of evaluation from both its decentralized and centralized functions, including:

- Strategic evaluations, which take a global perspective and focus on strategic issues for WFP as a whole (centralized evaluation)
- Policy evaluations, which examine to what extent WFP policies have achieved their objectives (centralized and decentralized evaluation)
- Country portfolio evaluations, which help country offices to understand their portfolio and what difference it makes (decentralized evaluation)
- Impact evaluations, which provide an in-depth analysis of the impact that WFP work has on beneficiaries (centralized evaluation)
- Operations evaluations, which address operational relevance, efficiency and effectiveness (centralized and decentralized evaluation)
- Joint evaluations, which are conducted jointly with evaluation offices of other organizations on any of the above types of evaluations[14]

52. Another relevant model for centralized and decentralized evaluation is UNDP. Paragraph 17 of the UNDP evaluation policy identifies two categories of evaluation in the organization: independent (centralized) evaluations conducted by the Evaluation Office and decentralized evaluations commissioned by programme units and conducted by independent external experts. The policy further defines the centralized Evaluation Office as being the custodian of the UNDP evaluation function responsible for planning independent evaluations, conducting thematic and country programme evaluations (known as assessments of development results) and ensuring that its evaluations provide strategic coverage of UNDP results and feed into decision-making. All independent evaluation reports are presented to the Executive Board alongside the new country programme document. The centralized function also sets standards for the planning, conduct and use of decentralized evaluations and assesses the quality of those evaluations. Decentralized evaluations, on the other hand, are commissioned by regional bureaux and country offices and are focused on programme outcomes at the field level. The Evaluation Office has established the Evaluation Resource Centre database containing evaluation plans for country programmes. All reports produced in accordance with these evaluation plans are assessed by the Evaluation Office, which reports on compliance with the evaluation plans as well as the quality of decentralized evaluation as part of its annual report to the UNDP Executive Board. All UNDP evaluation reports, as well as management responses, are available to the public on the Evaluation Resource Centre/UNDP website.

[12] See WFP Evaluation Policy 2008, para. 18.

[13] See Ibid., paras. 13 and 21.

[14] See http://www.wfp.org/about/evaluation and WFP Evaluation Policy 2008, WFP/EB.2/2008/4-A.

VI. Conclusion

53. Given the critical issues UNHCR faces in its work, and its direct impact on individual lives, it is imperative that evidence-based evaluation on programme results and outcomes, although challenging, be available to guide decision-making on programme design and implementation. UNHCR needs to know if what it is doing works and is cost-efficient, and what changes could be made to how it does business in order to have an even greater impact. In order to achieve this, it needs a strong, robust and fully comprehensive evaluation function. While the Policy Development and Evaluation Service has served a pivotal and useful role in the organization, given its current mandate and resources, it has not been able to fully meet the organization's evolving evaluation needs.

54. The key question that UNHCR needs to answer is what role it wants evaluation to play in the organization. Once this is decided, senior management needs to advocate for the function and ensure a sufficiently robust enabling environment for evaluation to be undertaken. A crucial part of this will be to build and support an evaluation culture in UNHCR, one in which evaluation is seen as adding value to the work of the organization and demonstrating UNHCR results, impact on the lives of beneficiaries and value-for-money.

55. There are significant steps that UNHCR can undertake to strengthen its evaluation function. First, a more explicit and detailed discussion that links evaluation with the UNHCR overall mandate, expected accomplishments and goals would facilitate the strengthening of evaluation activities by defining their intended contribution to achieving results. This should be addressed specifically in the evaluation policy. Evaluation in UNHCR should answer three key questions: are the right things being done; are they being done right; and are they being done on a scale that makes a difference.

56. UNHCR would also benefit from a robust evaluation function that encompasses both centralized and decentralized evaluation. Centralized evaluation would address organization-wide strategic issues and should be carried out independently from those responsible for programme operations and the results it seeks to evaluate. Decentralized evaluation would have a narrower scope and should be embedded within programme operations. UNHCR can more strategically utilize existing resources and activities within the Division of Programme Support and Management and the Division of International Protection in order to strengthen and regularize its decentralized evaluation.

57. Investments in results-based systems have the potential to reinvigorate the evaluation function as part of an integrated monitoring and evaluation system. The corporate attention and multimillion dollar resource envelope that UNHCR has devoted since 2006 to establishing an extensive results-based system that adopts a logical approach for planning, management, data collection and evidence-based assessment of its annual programme cycle is an important component that should be integrated into the larger UNHCR evaluation system.

58. The strengthening of the evaluation function in UNHCR to better contribute to organizational results, learning and accountability will take time and needs a long-term vision and strategy as well as strong leadership. OIOS has made five important recommendations to start this process.

VII. Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (result A)

59. UNHCR should establish a dedicated and discrete evaluation unit at headquarters with responsibility for conducting programmatic and cross-cutting strategic evaluations of UNHCR. In establishing this unit, three criteria should be met:

(a) The unit should be independent from any other programme operations;

(b) The unit should work solely on evaluation and not be tasked with any additional responsibilities such as policy development; and

(c) The unit should be given sufficient organizational independence with regard to evaluation planning, conduct and reporting.

60. There are several options available to UNHCR in implementing this recommendation. They include keeping evaluation within the Policy Development and Evaluation Service but making it a separate unit staffed by evaluators who are responsible solely for evaluation; moving the evaluation function into the Inspector General's Office; and creating a totally separate evaluation unit that reports directly to the High Commissioner.

61. UNHCR partially agreed with this recommendation.

Recommendation 2 (results A and C)

62. UNHCR should revise its evaluation policy in order to establish an adequate framework for how evaluation is implemented in the organization, including the gaps identified in the present review. Specifically, it should:

(a) Provide a sufficiently clear explanation of the concept and role of evaluation within the specific UNHCR organizational context;

(b) Establish a system consisting of centralized evaluation undertaken at the headquarters level and decentralized evaluation undertaken at the field (regional and country) level, with a clear strategy that relies on complementarity and synergy between the two functions;

(c) More clearly define and delineate the respective roles, responsibilities and objectives of centralized and decentralized evaluation;

(d) Clarify the reporting lines for evaluation, including consideration of direct reporting of key, strategic evaluation reports to the Executive Committee; and

(e) Delineate a regular and systematic evaluation workplanning process, based on the organization's programme logic, that incorporates all types of work undertaken by UNHCR as well as ad hoc requests, mandates or joint evaluations with other United Nations agencies or offices.

63. UNHCR agreed with this recommendation.

Recommendation 3 (result B)

64. UNHCR should strengthen the rigour and utility of its evaluations by establishing procedures and methodologies for assessing UNHCR results. Specifically, this should include:

(a) Development of evaluation terms of reference with clearly stated evaluation criteria, questions and data-collection methods, and evaluation design;

(b) Development of evaluation methodologies that will enable the assessment of the effectiveness and impact of UNHCR interventions in the field; and

(c) Reports that clearly and directly speak to the results achieved by UNHCR.

65. UNHCR agreed with this recommendation.

Recommendation 4 (result B)

66. UNHCR should develop a regular and systematic process for follow-up to evaluation recommendations. Specifically, this should include:

(a) Clear mechanisms for developing a management response to all evaluations;

(b) The stipulation that an action plan stating how and when the recommendations will be implemented be required for all evaluations;

(c) Procedures for periodic and regular follow-up on recommendation implementation; and

(d) Establishment of clear accountability for recommendation implementation.

67. UNHCR agreed with this recommendation.

Recommendation 5 (result C)

68. UNHCR should develop a strategy for strengthening decentralized evaluation in the field. Specifically, the strategy should consider:

(a) Processes and mechanisms needed for regular and systematic evaluation at the regional and country levels;

(b) How to better exploit existing capacity within the Division of Programme Support and Management and the Division of International Protection;

(c) Size and type of country programme activities when developing a country-level evaluation function;

(d) How to build an evaluation culture among programme managers in the field;

(e) Respective roles and responsibilities of centralized and decentralized evaluation; and

(f) Where and how centralized and decentralized evaluation should be integrated into the UNHCR programming cycle.

69. UNHCR agreed with this recommendation.

(*Signed*) Carman L. **Lapointe**
Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services
22 March 2013

Annex*

Memorandum dated 20 March 2013 from the Deputy High Commissioner of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees addressed to the Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

UNHCR response to OIOS review of UNHCR evaluation capacity

1. UNHCR welcomes the review by OIOS of UNHCR's evaluation capacity. It nevertheless takes exception to the following aspects of the report:

> Current UNHCR evaluation capacity does not fully meet United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards for independence, credibility and utility; in particular, the credibility of UNHCR's evaluation function is constrained by methodological limitations in assessing results.

Response:

The evaluation function is structured differently across the United Nations system, whereas the OIOS report appears to suggest that there is only one standard model. In UNHCR, the Policy Development and Evaluation Service is a unified structure which enjoys full methodological independence. Moreover, UNHCR's evaluation policy prevents senior management from interfering with evaluation findings and recommendations. UNHCR believes that a demand-driven approach to evaluation does not compromise independence. On the contrary, a demand-driven approach is more likely to ensure that evaluation focuses on operations and issues that are of strategic importance to the organization and which are characterized by a high level of risk. A thorough review of evaluations undertaken by the Policy Development and Evaluation Service would demonstrate that senior management does not request the Service to undertake evaluations of operations that are deemed to be successful. Indeed, evaluations are frequently prompted by perceived organizational difficulties and weaknesses.

The organization refutes the suggestion that its evaluations currently lack rigour and do not focus on the effectiveness and impact of UNHCR interventions. Moreover, the OIOS comments about UNHCR's evaluation function lacking credibility are not supported by the positive feedback and interactions that the Policy Development and Evaluation Service and the Executive Office enjoy with Executive Committee members, other United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and other members of the humanitarian community. Major donors in particular have been consistently supportive of the Service and its work.

2. UNHCR appreciates the recommendations of the review and would like to focus on them with the following observations:

* In the present annex, OIOS presents the full text of comments from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This practice has been instituted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 64/263, following the recommendation of the independent Audit Advisory Committee.

Recommendation 1 (result A)

UNHCR should establish a dedicated and discrete evaluation unit in headquarters with responsibility for conducting programmatic and cross-cutting strategic evaluations of UNHCR. In establishing this unit, three criteria should be met:

(a) The unit should be independent from any other programme operations;

(b) The unit should work solely on evaluation and not be tasked with any additional responsibilities such as policy development; and

(c) The unit should be given sufficient organizational independence with regard to evaluation planning, conduct and reporting.

There are several options available to UNHCR in implementing this recommendation. They include keeping evaluation within the Policy Development and Evaluation Service, but making it a separate unit staffed by evaluators that are responsible solely for evaluation; moving the evaluation function into the Office of the Inspector General; and creating a totally separate evaluation unit that reports directly to the High Commissioner.

Recommendation 1: UNHCR partially agrees to the recommendations with the following observations:

UNHCR regards evaluation and policy analysis as integral functions. Furthermore, UNHCR values organizational independence with regard to evaluation planning, conduct and reporting and agrees that it needs capacity and resources to conduct evaluations commensurate with its annual budget. This, however, requires further internal analysis and reflection, also in the context of the future of oversight in UNHCR and the options provided in this OIOS report, to chart the way forward.

Recommendation 2 (results A and C)

UNHCR should revise its evaluation policy in order to establish an adequate framework for how evaluation is implemented in the organization, including the gaps identified in the review. Specifically, it should:

(a) Provide a sufficiently clear explanation of the concept and role of evaluation within the specific UNHCR organizational context;

(b) Establish a system consisting of centralized evaluation undertaken at the headquarters level and decentralized evaluation undertaken at the field (regional and country) level, with a clear strategy that relies on complementarity and synergy between the two functions;

(c) More clearly define and delineate the respective roles, responsibilities and objectives of centralized and decentralized evaluation;

(d) Clarify the reporting lines for evaluation, including consideration of direct reporting of key, strategic evaluation reports to the Executive Committee; and

(e) Delineate a regular and systematic evaluation workplanning process, based on the organization's programme logic, that incorporates all types of work undertaken by UNHCR as well as ad hoc requests, mandates or joint evaluations with other United Nations agencies or offices.

Recommendation 2: UNHCR agrees to the recommendations and will continue to periodically report to the Executive Committee on key evaluations of strategic nature.

Recommendation 3 (result B)

UNHCR should strengthen the rigour and utility of its evaluations by establishing procedures and methodologies for assessing UNHCR results. Specifically, this should include:

(a) Development of evaluation terms of reference with clearly stated evaluation criteria, questions and data-collection methods, and evaluation design;

(b) Development of evaluation methodologies that will enable the assessment of the effectiveness and impact of UNHCR interventions in the field; and

(c) Reports that clearly and directly speak to the results achieved by UNHCR.

Recommendation 3: UNHCR agrees to the recommendations.

Recommendation 4 (result B)

UNHCR should develop a regular and systematic process for follow-up to evaluation recommendations. Specifically, this should include:

(a) Clear mechanisms for developing a management response to all evaluations;

(b) The stipulation that an action plan stating how and when the recommendations will be implemented be required for all evaluations;

(c) Procedures for periodic and regular follow-up on recommendation implementation; and

(d) Establishment of clear accountability for recommendation implementation.

Recommendation 4: UNHCR agrees to the recommendations and, in this context, has recently introduced a new management response requirement for evaluations, overseen by the newly established Internal Compliance and Accountability Committee.

Recommendation 5 (result C)

UNHCR should develop a strategy for strengthening decentralized evaluation in the field. Specifically, the strategy should consider:

(a) Processes and mechanisms needed for regular and systematic evaluation at the regional and country levels;

(b) How to better exploit existing capacity within the Division of Programme Support and Management and the Division of International Protection;

(c) Size and type of country programme activities when developing a country-level evaluation function;

(d) How to build an evaluation culture among programme managers in the field;

(e) Respective roles and responsibilities of centralized and decentralized evaluation; and

(f) Where and how centralized and decentralized evaluation should be integrated into the UNHCR programming cycle.

Recommendation 5: UNHCR agrees to the recommendations with the following observations:

A decentralized evaluation function in UNHCR would have to be considered as a long-term process since it has important resource and capacity implications. This will include enhanced expertise and capacity to provide quality control to and regularly monitor a decentralized evaluation function.